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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study of the etiology of alcoholism and conduct disorders that involved 3-year-old sons of alcoholic fathers are reported. The study focused on intact nuclear families with a son who was 3 years old at the time of initial data collection and a father who was diagnosed as definitely or probably alcoholic. Alcoholic families were recruited from the population of males convicted for driving while impaired or driving under the influence of alochol. Both parents independently completed the Antisocial Behavior Checklist and the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist. Data indicated a strong relationship between fathers' antisocial behavior and their perceptions of behavior problems in their sons. Maternal aggression was not related to mothers' perceptions of behavioral problems in their children. But maternal antisocial behavior was significantly related to mothers' perceptions of level of depression in their sons. It is concluded that even though the data provide no basis for inferring causal relationships, they clearly demonstrate that parents in families with alcohol problems perceive real or imagined behavior problems in male offspring even at the age of 3 years that have been linked to the etiology of alcoholism. (RH)

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Parental Aggression Related to Behavior Problems in Three-year-old Sons of Alcoholics

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Abstract

Clinical and empirical literatures converge to support the hypothesis that there is a causal relationship between parental alcoholism, antisocial behavior, and their children's conduct disorders and subsequent risk for alcoholism and substance abuse. Data from the first wave of a 15-year longitudinal study of the etiology of alcoholism and conduct disorders are reported, focusing on three-year old sons of alcoholic fathers. Each parent completed the antisocial behavior checklist, and the achenbach child behavior checklist. Results indicated a strong relationship between fathers' antisocial behavior, and their perceptions of behavior problems in their three-year-old sons. Maternal aggression was not related to their perceptions of behavioral problems in their children, but maternal antisocial behavior was significantly related to their perceptions of level of depression in their sons. Although these data provide no basis for inferring causal relationships, they clearly demonstrate that parents in alcohol distressed families perceive (real or imagined) behavior problems in their three-year-old sons that are consistent with the extant clinical and empirical literatures germane to an understanding of the etiology of alcoholism and conduct disorders.

At least a million american children are reared in families with alcohol-related problems. Such families have significant difficulties with behavioral, occupational, and interpersonal functioning and are characterized by a high degree of hostility, aggression, antisocial behavior, and inconsistent parenting. Many clinical reports on children of alcoholics (coa's) describe difficulties that coa's have with interpersonal relationships, antisocial tendencies, impulsivity, and delinquent behavior. In general, clinical and empirical literatures give a picture of coa's as antisocial, uncontrolled, impulsive, rebellious, aggressive, disobedient, and subject to high levels of guilt, shame, insecurity, fear, and anger. Such attributions are based primarily on retrospective reports from adult coa's, who themselves are alcoholic. Nevertheless, evidence is mounting to support a relationship between parental alcoholism and conduct problems in children, such as lying, stealing, fighting, school truancy and behavior problems, and police contacts (Sher, 1987; Barry, 1982).

Prospectively, little is known about the specific determinants of family life that serve to predispose children to alcoholism. Although recognition that experiences of infancy and early childhood may provide a foundation for subsequent alcoholism and alcohol related problems, little attention has been given to the etiological significance of the first few years of life for such pathology. This is not the case for antisocial behavior where developmental approaches emphasize intergenerational transmission, family life stress, and poor parenting as critical sources of variance in the etiology of antisocial behavior. Interestingly enough, there is growing recognition that childhood aggression is a

common antecedent of both alcoholism and antisocial behavior (Barry, 1982).

Method

Subjects

Alcoholic families are recruited from the population of males convicted for driving while impaired or driving under the influence of alcohol. The specific recruitment population is all males convicted of these offenses, who register blood alcohol concentrations of 0.15% (150mg/100ml) Or higher when arrested, who are currently cohabitating or married, living in an intact family, and who have a biological son between the ages of three and six. (The final longitudinal sample will consist of 90 target families and 90 community comparison families.) Experience with this group shows that virtually all fathers who meet our conditions will meet standard research diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis of either "definite alcoholism" or "probably alcoholism" with over 80% meeting the "definite level" and also meeting dsm-iii-r criteria for alcohol dependence. Although recruitment into the study depends upon father's alcohol related problems, data collection involves all members of the nuclear family unit. The present study focuses on those families whose son was three-years-old at the initial data collection visit.

Measures and procedures.

Parents independently completed the antisocial behavior checklist (asb; zucker & noll, 1980), an inventory involving ten different subscales, including: parental defiance, adolescent delinquent behavior, job related antisocial behavior, sexual behavior, runaway/truent behavior, physical aggression, sensation seeking, school related antisocial behavior, trouble with the law, and marital behavior. In

addition, parents independently completed the achenbach child behavior checklist (Achenbach, 1978), an instrument that yields standardized scores on social competency, two broad subscales concerning externalizing and internalizing psychopathology, and eight narrow band subscales (social withdrawal, depressed, immature, somatic complaints, sex problems, schizoid, aggressive, and delinquent).

Results

For both parents, pearson product moment correlations were computed on the aggression subscale of the asb, the total asb score, and perceived problems with the child (achenbach). Mothers' and fathers' aggression and antisocial behavior were not statistically related to each other. Parents' ratings of the child's problems agreed on some scales [Immaturity: r (13) = .47, $p < .05$; Aggression: r (13) = .46, $p < .05$); and Depression: r (13) = .44, $p < .06$], But not on others (Total Problems, Social Withdrawal, and Delinquency).

As indicated in Table 1, with the exception of depression, fathers' aggression and antisocial behavior were significantly related to their perceptions of their three-year-old sons' behavior problems (all p's $<$ .05). Although mothers' aggression was not related to their perceptions of their children's behavior problems, mothers' antisocial behavior was significantly related to perceptions of their children's depression [$r(12)=.58$, $p < .05$], and was marginally related to their perception of their children's immaturity [$r(12)=.43$, $p < .08$] and total problems [$r(12)=.38$, $p < .10$].

Discussion

Despite the small sample, these data clearly indicate coherence between parental alcoholism and parental perceptions of behavior problems

in their children. Moreover, the strength of the relationship clearly was strongest for fathers. The pattern of father-son correlations is consistent with descriptions of antisocial alcoholism, which is characterized by such externalizing behaviors as aggression, impulsiveness, and rebellion (Barry, 1982; Zucker, 1987). Such behaviors are strongly implicated in the childhoods of future alcoholics (Barry, 1982). On the other hand, the only significant mother-son correlation was for depression, an internalized behavior associated with dependent alcoholism (Barry, 1982; Zucker, 1987).

Currently, the small sample size and dependence on correlational statistics limits inferences about causal dynamics in parent-child relationships and developmental outcome. Nevertheless, it should not be taken lightly that by the time these boys are age three, parents (especially fathers) perceive such problems. For example, a pilot study involving behavioral observations on the larger sample of 3- to 6-year old sons (Ojala, 1988) reported findings consistent with the current results, thereby providing external support for their validity.

Models such as these developed by Patterson (Patterson, Debaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989) for the development of antisocial behavior predict continuity between inconsistent, harsh, and neglectful parenting and child conduct problems. Child conduct problems, in turn, predict adolescent delinquency and adult antisocial behavior. Interestingly enough, Pettit and Bates (1989) found that the absence of positive mother-child interactions in early infancy were stronger predictors of behavior problems at four years of age than were displays of family coercion. And in the larger age range of children in the full study, greater maternal depression is predictive of more child to parent

aggression and more mother to child aggression (Reider et al., 1988). Level of spousal violence is also high among the younger, lower ses couples in the current sample (Reider et al., 1988), Particularly in instances where the husbands have a history of antisocial behavior and a severe drinking problem. The long-term effects of such paternal behavior on their sons' antisocial behavior has yet to be determined, but patterson's model clearly predicts negative consequences.

Whether such models of family interactions and parental perceptions, including the model guiding our longitudinal study (Zucker, 1987), will yield similar predictive validity awaits analysis of wave-two data involving the full sample from the data set. Nevertheless, the current findings suggest that as early as three years of age, male sons in alcoholic families are perceived by their fathers to have behavior problems that have been linked conceptually to the etiology of alcoholism.

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Table 1

Relationship between parents' aggression (ASB subscale) and antisocial behavior (asb total score) and children's behavior problems (Achenbach CBCL)

	Children's behavior problems (CBCL)					
	total problems	social withdrawal	depression	immaturity	aggression	delinquency
Parent ASB						
Mother						
Aggression	.20	.03	.33	.32	.02	.13
Total score	.38	-.16	.58*	.43	.23	.31
Father						
Aggression	.58*	.70*	.23	.68*	.65*	.64*
Total score	.60*	.62*	.31	.80*	.64*	.66*

Note: for n = 14, r = .46 is significant at the .05 level.